DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 040 196 TE 001 872

AUTHOR Povey, John
TITLE The Novels of Chinua Achebe for the High School Teacher.
INSTITUTION California Association of Teachers of English, Redlands.
PUB DATE Feb 70
NOTE 6p.
JOURNAL CIT California English Journal; v6 n1 p22-27 Feb 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40
DESCRIPTORS African Culture, *African Literature, Cultural Factors, Cultural Interrelationships, Culture Conflict, *Literature Appreciation, Moral Values, *Novels, *Secondary Education, Social Change, Social Values, World Literature
IDENTIFIERS *Chinua Achebe

ABSTRACT

As an international language, English is being used to produce fresh, exciting, and relevant new literature--some of which is coming from Africa. An excellent introduction to African literature are the four novels of Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian. "Things Fall Apart" concerns events at the turn of the century with the arrival of British Colonials, "Arrow of God" covers events just before World War I when British power was being fully established, "No Longer At Ease" deals with approaching independence in the 1950's, and "Man of the People" treats contemporary events dealing with the new African administration of the country. Thoroughly educated in the English literary tradition, Achebe has created these novels enriched with African proverbs, idioms, and views of tribal life, but dealing with a universal problem--that of maintaining individual integrity in a violently changing society where the faith on which morality is based is being challenged. (JM)

California English Journal; Vol. 6, No. 1, February, 1970

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED040196

The Novels of Chinua Achebe for the High School Teacher

JOHN POVEY
University of California at Los Angeles

I am always concerned to read the book lists of those "world" literature courses which, by their narrowly selective nature, seem always to assume that the world ends at the boundaries of Europe, and that sufficient concession has been made to internationalism if a Greek drama, a Russian short story and a French essay are added to the more conventional British offerings. We should rather remind ourselves that English is itself an international language. It is no longer the exclusive property of the Anglo-Saxons. It is used across the world, not only as a convenient vehicle for formal political and commercial communication, but within individual countries as a medium for creativity too. New literatures have developed that represent a far wider world of English usage. These are not only those better known areas such as Australia and New Zealand, where settler writings have gradually developed into new national literatures, but other regions where English might seem a more unexpected national language. In India, in the Philippines, in Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya, English is used, and from these areas fresh and exciting new literature has grown.

ED040196

Africa during the last decade or two has begun a particularly rich new literature and its vital contemporary relevance would indicate the great advantage of using some African writing in the classroom. Not only is that continent so regularly in the news, but it rests at the very heart of the Afro-American's earnest desire to seek racial and cultural roots with the cultures from which their ancestors were so cruelly torn. Such writing also fits very easily into the inter-disciplinary frameworks devised for many of the more imaginative new courses which center on projects and analysis.

There is much in this new African writing of interest and it contains much that would inform the social science teachers or even historians and

---

JOHN POVEY, managing editor of **African Arts/Arts d'Afrique**, teaches in the Department of English at the University of California at Los Angeles and heads the section on African Literature in the African Studies Center at UCLA. For this contribution the editor also wishes to thank Virginia Scardigli, Gunn High School, Palo Alto, who invited Dr. Povey to write for us in the field he knows so well.

geographers. But as a rigorous and unrepentant teacher of literature I would never advocate using works in the English classes on the grounds of the interest of their content. Content is a dangerous measure of quality and students are very quick to detect the inferior during comprehensive library study. Luckily the writing now being published from Africa is of the highest caliber and many works demand our respect even from the specifically literary criteria which our own studies have established for us as both students and teachers.

Such African writers as Wole Soyinka or Chinua Achebe are so sophisticated and skillful that their works may very appropriately be studied in an English literature class. These writers draw upon the whole tradition of English literature which they have studied at university, and yet their themes and attitudes are firmly rooted in their own African culture. Although these works are from a foreign environment, the fact that the writers are so familiar with the English literary heritage makes them readily intelligible to the American student. From such books the student will in fact learn many things about African tribal life but he will need no advanced anthropological knowledge to make their events comprehensible any more than a familiarity with the English Lake District is a necessity for enjoying Wordsworth. The language of African writers does have a specific flavor derived from its use of familiar proverbs and the occasional conversations in localized pidgin English. Yet it is comprehensible since the African writer is well aware that he must remain intelligible to the international audience who will read his works.

There are many good writers whose poetry, short stories and plays could well delight the high school student and open new dimensions to his study of literature in English. But a long list is very daunting and can become a mere annotated bibliography. I believe it is more helpful, initially, to make a very specific suggestion of readily available material which I have found particularly appropriate. Perhaps the best beginning to African literature in English may be found in the four novels of the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who has been greatly praised by the critics and whose work has been repeatedly used as an approved literary text in schools in Africa and elsewhere. Achebe's novels are all available in paperback in this country and thus can be cheaply used in the classroom.

With the publication of *Man of the People,* Achebe has concluded his tetralogy on the history of the people who live in an Igbo village in Eastern Nigeria. These four novels span a period in Nigerian history from the first arrival of the missionaries and the British colonial admin-

istration in Nigeria to the present day, which is described with such prescient contemporaneity that the conclusion of the last novel accidentally anticipated by a few weeks the actual military coup with which the Nigerian army first took power. Although these novels are completely separate in their plots, their cumulative effect is the more powerful now that we can see the progression which Achebe conceived from the first. There is a clear continuity as he follows the fortunes of his villagers across the decades, even though the series does not cover the false family totality of such dreary works as *White Oaks* or *The Forsyte Saga.*

The historical sequence of these novels is not the same as that of their publication. Achebe told me that although he had planned the whole sequence as soon as he began to write the first book, he felt that it would be boring and make for stale writing if he were forced to write two rather similar novels one after the other. He therefore shuffled the chronological order of events when he wrote his series. Achebe began with *Things Fall Apart* (1958) which concerns the earliest period, events at the turn of the century, including the first arrival of the British Colonials. *Arrow of God* (1964), the third novel to be written, describes events just before World War I, when British power was being fully established throughout the entire country. There is a wide gap of time at this point, as *No Longer at Ease* (1960), the second book to be published, deals with the fifties, when independence is close. The events of the last published book, *Man of the People* (1966), are exactly contemporary, dealing with the new African administration of the country.

The two historical novels have the more powerful impact because of their tragic and shattering resolutions. But perhaps this is only to feel, wrongly, that the fall of a society is more painful than the fall of an individual man, and such quantitative judgments might be entirely inaccurate in art and the fall of a symbolic hero is also the decline of a race. One soon perceives that there is more similarity than difference among these four novels. This similarity may be traced not only in the style which demonstrates Achebe's characteristic ironic wit and confident use of African proverbs and idiom, but also in the similar problems faced by each of the main characters. The protagonists in all of these four books face a violently changing society in which there is no certainty of belief on which to base a morality with which to face the disintegrating flux of events. The confrontation is similar whether it is seen as Okonkwo's grappling with the first unimaginable apparition of the white invader or Ezeulu's assertion of his power as priest of his traditional god against the evangelical strength of the missionaries. In the two later novels, although

the European educated heroes are no longer themselves men of tradition nor tribal substance, they have to cope with the same disintegration in both national and personal values. Obi, in *No Longer at Ease,* is initially as confident in his strength as his ancestors Okonkwo and Ezeulu had been, but he too falls when tempted by the omnipresent opportunities for bribery for which his training has made him more prone than resistant. Odili, in *Man of the People,* discovers among the savage violence of Nigerian party politics the limits of his own integrity. Although unlike the other three he is released from fundamental personal decision by the rather hurried terminal solution of the army's coup, the experience makes very clear to him the limitations of his own morality in contemporary conditions where nothing can be assured as noble.

As Achebe writes of his heroes, one sees that he is exploring, in different historical situations, the significance of individual integrity in periods of chaotic social change. He raises the issue of the values by which anyone can live when those beliefs to which he was born have become limited, suspect, and ultimately rejected and the newer beliefs proferred as substitutes have elements of dishonesty and inadequacy along with their tempting modern appeal. Each of Achebe's protagonists is offered a choice, an attractive and profitable escape, if only he will compromise his conscience and accept the offer of honor or wealth. (For example, Ezeulu is offered a chieftainship, Odili a lavish bribe.) But Achebe is too good a writer to allow these issues to stand in their bare simplistic morality. That would be too near to melodrama, a good/bad choice revealing only hero or villain, as if these polarities were the only likely alternatives to be faced by a man. Achebe's issues are always compounded by some very real moral complexities in the situation. There is no easy way out, no matter in which direction the choice is made. In this period of limbo between the conservative traditional and the new, who is it who can effectively judge what are the principles to which a man must hold so firmly that he is willing to suffer and even die for the faith these ideals grant to him? There are in fact good enough reasons why Ezeulu *ought* to give up his old god and join the Christians. There is even reason to suspect that part of the motive that forces his vehement rejection is as much psychological as spiritual, based on revenge as much as ideology. And the motives that drive Odili are only partly those of the dedicated intellectual shamed by political manoeuvring and graft—they are more intimate and less idealized—and anyway what is the role of an idealistic and compassionate intellectual in the free-for-all of national political

events? Must he compromise to be successful and does that invalidate his principles?

In fact, Achebe asks a more general question: Where does morality rest in a society where all beliefs are suddenly challenged by too rapid social change unsustained by a renewed morality? When all things fall apart? Since such questions may be among the most crucial queries that can be made by the young generation in our schools, it is revealing and rewarding to realize that Achebe is rigorously, even ruthlessly uncompromising, in the great tragic tradition. He does not debase his moral standards even when the dilemma which he has set for his characters appears to offer reasonable possibilities for compromise and legitimate evasion. We are glad that Ezeulu chooses to die, if that is the price that must be paid for individual honor. We know why Odili refuses the bribes even though it is pointless and others have advocated a less rigorous morality of pragmatic convenience. These characters assert that final brave honor which is the major evidence of the last true nobility of the human spirit in a world where pragmatism and compromise are raised to high virtues and where success and adjustment become identified. A student who is introduced to Achebe's *Arrow of God* will not only learn in a most immediate and poignant way those ironies of individual decision and blame that rest at the heart of the Aristotelean concept of tragedy, but he will also learn the universal agony which all noble men must face as their too fine an integrity rates against the easy and shabby standards of those who can be satisfied to live with a flexible conscience.

This too brief an essay began with a mere advocacy of several new novels to supplement a too restrictive English literature curriculum. But it has concluded with some very broad assertions of the nobility and grandeur of the human spirit. The jump of topic is certainly not as inappropriate as it may seem. For if literature is evidence of the very heart of the human experience, the teacher of literature has to play the most crucial of all educational roles. She has to bring the student into a recognition, and hopefully a true understanding, of the ultimate morality of the human soul. And this can be accomplished not so much by presenting the lectures of experts as by leading students to see that such understanding rests in the *literature* of our language, which has become the continuing morality of the race. This may perhaps seem too great a task, yet I believe that literature teachers have just this crucial responsibility. The fact that a young Igbo writing in Nigeria can affirm the most significant elements of the individual conscience and the human condition can be made a revelation to many students who are too often locked in a

rather parochial world of localized experience. The fact that such a writer, so distant, so foreign, raises just such issues and makes just such affirmations as have vexed the human soul since written record began, is evidence not only of the usefulness of African literature in the classroom—no, that is to set the sights too low—it is, rather, evidence of the true significance of all literature and should support the pride that an English teacher feels in the significance and *relevance* of all that she teaches.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Calif. English Journal and author TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."